

# EXHIBIT

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FEATURED

## Head Start director speaks out on federal fallout

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Apr 10, 2025

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**Korben Hayworth, 4, and Samara McClair, 4, show off their creations in their pre-K classroom at Woonsocket Head Start.** 2021.

Breeze photo by Lauren Clem



WOONSOCKET – Local Head Start providers are facing deep uncertainty after the federal government abruptly shut down five regional program offices, disrupting the support system that early childhood education programs have relied on for decades.

Though Children's Friend, the largest Head Start provider in Rhode Island, confirmed it has not experienced direct cuts, leaders of smaller programs, such as Woonsocket's, say the future looks grim. The closure of the Boston regional office has left them without access to key personnel responsible for reviewing grants, providing oversight, and answering day-to-day operational questions.

"We have no support," Woonsocket Head Start Director Mary Varr told *The Breeze*. "Everything is very much up in the air."

Children's Friend CEO David Caprio told *The Breeze* that his organization, which serves more than 1,000 children across Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls, has not seen its funding impacted. But broader concerns remain about the program's future.

In Woonsocket, Varr's federally funded program serves 164 children. While funding is secured through the summer, her next grant proposal is due in June. Normally, a program specialist at the now-closed Boston regional office would assist in reviewing that application.

Varr said she was "in shock" when she and colleagues learned the Boston office had shut down. Without clarity from the Office of Head Start, she worries that the situation could lead to delays or something worse.

"The Head Start world is very concerned that this is just the first step toward elimination," she said. "I don't know what the status will be in September."

On April 1, the National Head Start Association confirmed the closure of regional offices in Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle. The closures were part of a reorganization within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

A news release from the association warned that “closing these regional Head Start offices could create delays in essential program support and weaken the system that has successfully served millions of children for decades.”

According to a recent Associated Press report, staff layoffs at the Department of Health and Human Services have further rattled preschool leaders. The AP cited multiple incidents where Head Start programs were unable to access federal funding systems, forcing temporary closures, furloughs, and lost income for families.

“You can kneecap programs simply by cutting significant numbers of their workforce,” Joel Ryan, head of the Washington State Association of Head Start, told the AP.

Savanna Noe, a Woonsocket mother of two and a member of the local Head Start Policy Council, said the program has been a lifeline for her family, especially during periods of crisis, including domestic violence, separation from her children, and a long journey back toward stability.

“Despite not having my girls in my home, the Head Start teachers were still in regular communication with me,” she said. “They saw our potential and helped us realize it.”

Noe credits Head Start with her children’s emotional and academic development. After returning from medical leave, her younger daughter not only re-entered the classroom with confidence, but made measurable gains in literacy and social skills by the end of the school year.

Without programs such as Head Start, Noe said, many parents would struggle to break cycles of poverty and trauma.

"They don't just support kids," she said. "They support whole families."

As Varr explained, Head Start is more than just a preschool program. It provides early intervention services for children with special needs, while also offering wraparound support for families, including help with job applications, resume building, and connecting parents to GED or higher education programs.

The goal, she said, is to ensure that both children and their caregivers are equipped with the tools they need to succeed long-term. And, in some cases, Varr said that early intervention programs can ensure that children don't enter the public school system with an Individualized Education Program.

For now, Head Start programs remain operational at the local level, but the future looks uncertain. While national funding levels have not been formally reduced, providers across the country say the lack of communication, delays in grant processing, and absence of regional oversight are already impacting day-to-day operations.

Varr said she hopes community members and elected officials will advocate for the program's future.

"The families we serve need this," she said. "We can't afford to lose it."

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